

“Midnight Conversation”

By Breanne Blackwell

The night sky is full of stars but there is no moon. Below it, the lake is a vastness of charcoal slime, the waves barely touching the shore. I sit on the large, sturdy stone that floats above the water. It's too cold, and too late, to be at the beach. Yet there I sit, staring at the moonless sky.

I hear him make his way down the shore, kicking up cold sand and shells. Water sprays onto the back of the rock as he rushes into the lake. I pull my legs closer to my chest in defense as he climbs up next to me. The rock is not large enough for both of us, but that doesn't deter him as he sits next to me. We are silent. Dark clouds begin to trace over the stars, tucking them in for the night. The temperature continues to drop, causing my arm hairs to stand on end. He takes his jacket off and tries to wrap it around my shoulders. I turn away, pushing him aside. A sigh.

“You're going to get sick if you stay out here.”

“Don't care.” I mutter back.

He sighs again, a common noise for him. Especially when we talk. But he's not ready to give up tonight.

“You know what they think doesn't matter.”

I scoff, of course he thinks that. He hadn't been there. He hadn't heard the curses that had been barreled at me by my own father. He hadn't seen my mother's fervent tears of arrogance.

“They just need some time to get used to it.” He continues. “Once they begin to understand you're still the same person, I'm sure they'll settle down. If you just gave them some time and space. This isn't the end of the world. We can-”

“Shut up!” I scream into the lake, breaking the peaceful air with one sharp slash. Then the tears came, hot, heavy, and annoying. “They’ll never understand, I knew they wouldn’t. I should have just kept it a secret.” My nose begins to run, and I use my sleeves to wipe the snot away.

He drapes his arm around my shoulder, and I let him pull me close. The familiar smell of mahogany cologne comforts me, slowly pushing back the tears. He had been so amazing when I told him. I had been terrified, the fear of rejection never so strong. What would he say when his best friend for the past ten years was not who he thought I was? Would he cast me aside like a worn pair of shoes?

The anticipation had grown all night, he must have known I was carrying this huge secret. Yet he didn’t pressure me, he just waited until I was ready. And then I knew it was time, and it just burst out, flying out of my mouth like a beast that had been caged up for years. I told him about always feeling different and awkward. About stealing my sister’s clothes and wearing them in the dead of night. About trying to fix the problem myself with a pair of garden shears. I had stood there crying like a baby, the weight of secrets on my chest replaced by one of fear. But he had only smiled, and hugged me just as he was now.

“It’s ok.” He murmurs now into my growing hair. “You get to choose your family. I’m your family.”

“That’s so cheesy.” I whisper into his immense chest. I feel his fingers run through my hair, stroking it smoothly, a sure fire way to calm me down. When I had begun to grow it out, it started coarse and uneven. For I while I didn’t think it was possible for me to have naturally long hair. And then it evened out, stretching smooth and perfect, like this was how my hair was always meant to be.

“Do you think I could grow my hair out like yours?” He whispers into the breeze, letting the lake carry them away.

I laugh, burying my head deeper against him to hide from the wind. We remain that way, his hands idly in my hair, mine buried under my shaking legs. It’s pitch black now, the night sky merely an endless void of dark velvet.

“Do you remember when I took you dress shopping?” He mutters, already remembering it himself. I did. I had decided that the local gay prom was the perfect place to come out. The plan was to steal one of my sister’s dresses, but he insisted on the two of us going shopping.

“Nothing has ever been so awkward.” I laugh. Neither of us really knew anything about dresses, I’m more of a jeans and t-shirt kind of gal. And of course he’s a straight white guy who wears the same basketball shoes every day.

“At least I tried! You just kept running away to the jewelry section!”

“I was looking for a choker!” I protest.

“Oh and then that sales girl...”

“Who was totally into you.”

He ignores me, continuing on. “Who thought we were lost and tried to take us to the men’s section.”

We’re silent for a moment, my laughter subsiding.

“Hey.” He bumps my leg, “No one would try to take you to the men’s section now.” I nod, forcing the smile to return. But in my mind the phrase, “My parents would” crawls across. When I was little, I’d cry every time we went shopping. Eventually my parents gave up, buying my clothes without me. So every day I went to school in a green polo and khakis, before rushing into the unisex bathroom to change into skinny jeans and one of my sister’s stolen blouses. She

eventually figured out I was stealing her clothes, but realised she didn't care. "You do you, bro." She'd said, staring at her half empty closet, "Just return them when you're done." After that I had free range of all her clothes, keeping the ones she'd outgrown or outworn. I look down now, her jeans are tattered, the knees baring giant, fraying holes. The sneakers are an even older pair of Converse, scuffed and dirty. His own shoes dangle next to mine. Flimsy sandals that keep threatening to fall into the water below.

"But we did find you a dress." He says, still trying to distract me.

I nod. "It was perfect." And I can't help but smile. When I put on the dress I finally felt like a woman. I looked in the mirror and saw what I had always wanted, a girl.

"You looked beautiful." He murmurs.

I am silent, an ancient question floating in my head. I always wondered if he felt awkward saying things like that. A year ago he would have said something like, "Looking sharp bro." Or "New shoes? Nice." Then we'd high five and go back to playing Call of Duty. Well, that part hasn't changed. Just because I'm a girl now doesn't mean I have to give up my love of video games. But so many other parts of our friendship have changed. Checking out girls at the mall, going to basketball games, and the general platonic nature of our friendship. When you're a girl, having a guy for a best friend leads to an endless stream of "Oh, you two are so cute together!" And, "I can't ask her out, isn't she dating him?"

I cough, whether from cold or nerves, I can't say. "Do you...do you ever wish I had stayed a boy?" I breathe, silently hoping he didn't hear me.

But of course he did, with the bat like hearing he has. "Of course not. Sure we had fun and stuff, but you were miserable."

"But things are so different now. Don't you ever feel awkward?"

He's silent for a moment, reflecting on the question. "Well sure, when you show up to school in a short skirt and I notice the guys checking you out it's awkward as all hell. Or when I see you use the ladies room sometimes I panic and think "He shouldn't be in there!"

I shift, raising myself away from him. Of course he isn't 100% ok with the whole thing, it was naive of me to assume so. I feel the air change around us as my emotions recoil inside me. While it was naive, I still wanted full acceptance. I wanted it to be as if I was always this way. I wanted people to forget I had ever been a boy.

His hand reaches toward mine, "Hold on, I wasn't done. While sometimes it is awkward, it's nothing I can't handle. Because I kick myself every time I start to remember you how you were, because that's not you." His rugged hand wraps around mine, his fingers pressing firmly into my palm. A sigh. "God, you're my best friend! And I'm going to do whatever it takes to make sure you're happy!" His frustration was evident, but I knew it wasn't directed at me. He expected too much of himself. He was a guy that got along with everyone, that never had a problem with anyone.

Until this moment, I hadn't realised this was a conversation we desperately needed. We'd been wading through the past year filled with smiles but behind them each was dealing with things in our own way. I had placed a laser focus on my new self, forgetting what effect this was having on others. He had pretended that this new change was normal, quelling the discomfort of losing his best friend. The person he had grown up with was dead. That little boy he went frog hunting with replaced by a makeup wearing girl. I had been so blind to what he must have been going through. And of course he couldn't tell me what he was feeling, I would have taken offense to anything he said.

“Hey, I’m sorry if this whole thing has been hard on you. I’ve just been so focused on myself I forgot that you lost your best friend.”

He laughs gently, softly shaking his head from side to side. “I didn’t lose my best friend, just got a more complete one.”

I smile at the corniness before punching his arm. He laughs, punching me back. This quickly escalates into a punching match until he falls into the chilling water below. I burst out laughing as he emerges dripping wet.

“Oh you think that’s funny huh?” He snickers, a sinister gleam forming in his pale eyes.

“No you don’t!” I scream, scrambling to stand up. But he has already grabbed my ankles, knocking me into water. It’s like being dumped into an ice bucket. The water fills my ears and nose. Yet at the same time a calming cool sweeps over me. The water scrubs me clean, washing away the doubts and pain, carrying them off with the tide. When I finally rise to the surface he’s standing on the rock, hands on hips in a superman pose. He smiles devilishly before lending a hand to help me up. The cold night air cuts blades into my sides, but I don’t care. We stand on that shiny rock and stare at the endless sky. It’s mysterious and vast, filled with possibilities and that great unknown every decent human fears. We stand side by side, arms brushing against the other.

I close my eyes, taking in the gentle roll of the waves against the stone. Back and forth. Back and forth. “I don’t want to go back.” I whisper to the waves. They whoosh back in response, whispering of security. Water drips off my frame, sliding down the rock to rejoin its brethren. His hand slowly rises to rest on my shaking shoulders. Shaking from cold, shaking from excitement. There was nothing left to say really, and if there was there were no words to express it.